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Online Brand Communities in Korea
: A Case Study

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Online Brand Communities in Korea
: A Case Study

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Online Brand Communities in Korea

: A Case Study

by

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The importance of online brand communities has received increasing attention from both academia and industry. This paper reports a case study. It explains successful online strategies developed by two leading brands, Samsung mobile and Chungjungwon, in Korea. The current study has shown that the online brand community can act as a marketing tool to develop a group of loyal consumers around the brand. This study provides marketers with insights into and some useful guidelines for the creation and maintenance of successful marketer-generated online brand communities. The findings also suggest that there are differences in community development and management strategies, according to the characteristics of product category and community members, as well as in the purpose of the community operation.

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has enabled people to connect and interact with one another without geographical restrictions, and it has created a virtual world where people can communicate, exchange information, and satisfy their various needs (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). In light of this revolutionary development of information technology, the acceleration of the Internet environment, and the dramatic rise in its use for social networking, marketers began to change the way they communicate and interact with customers, who have changed their attitudes from passive to much more active in searching for information via two-way communication (Kozinets, 1999). With these phenomena, a great number of online communities have been created on the Internet, where consumers share common interests, goals, or favorable brands. It would be worthwhile to research these online brand communities because their influential power is increasing rapidly, as is their number.

Muniz and O'Guinn, who developed the theoretical concept for and built a scientific research background focused on the brand community, defined a brand community as a "specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001, p. 423). Brand communities can be classified into two large groups according to the initiator and sponsor of the communities and whether they are customer-generated or marketer-generated (Leimeister, Sidiras, & Krcmar, 2004). Consumer-generated online brand communities are created and managed voluntarily by enthusiastic consumers for information and experience sharing among consumers (Shang, Chen, & Liao, 2006). In contrast, marketer-generated brand communities are built and operated by marketers to build stronger relationships with consumers and obtain consumers' information and ideas for product development (McWilliam, 2000).

Most previous research has been focused on customer-generated brand communities; little research exists regarding marketer-generated online brand communities. From a marketing perspective, a better understanding of the importance of the relationship marketing between brand and customers has become apparent (Berry, 1995). As a result, marketers began to display increasing interest in online brand communities as an effective tool for establishing long-term relationships with their customers. Because of this phenomenon, there are increasing numbers of successful cases of brand community marketing that make efficient use of online brand communities. The value of marketing using online brand communities is that these communities provide more accessibility, interactivity, and cost-effectiveness than traditional marketing does. Furthermore, they can also provide opportunities for new business and product development, and they can improve on traditional marketing strategies and activities such as product promotion, sales channel expansion, customer service improvement, brand image improvement, and customer relationship management (Rheingold, 1993).

Despite the widespread appreciation of their value, most of the previous studies about brand communities have remained at the investigative and discursive level, and they have focused primarily on how community attributes affect brand loyalty or on the concepts and characteristics of online brand communities. In addition, substantial verification is lacking relative to the brand community marketing effect and successful implementation strategies of marketer-generated brand communities due to the relatively short research period and lack of research data. Even though some research articles have focused on presenting successful brand community marketing cases, there has been relatively little research conducted on the strategic differences stemming from the characteristics of the brand or product category.

In order to obtain a better understanding of the creation and development of successful online marketer-generated brand communities, the current study explains several

successful online strategies developed by two leading brands: Samsung mobile and Chungjungwon in Korea. This study chose South Korea because of its leading position in broadband penetration, internet use and online community participation. The study of online brand communities in Korea where the internet usage and online communities are well established within the country is of value because it provides insights into how online brand community activities and strategies may evolve for other countries in which internet usage is growing. The structure of the paper is as follows. First, this paper presents a review of the literature about online brand communities. Then, it provides a detailed analysis of the Samsung mobile and Chungjungwon online brand communities, drawing valuable insights and suggestions from each case study. Finally, this paper discusses the consequences and implications of marketing strategies of online brand communities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online Community

Recently, many people participate in various types of online communities in their daily lives to satisfy needs and desires; communicate, obtain information, and derive entertainment, etc. In the early 1990s, online communities began to emerge with the advent of new technologies and electronic mediums, in particular the Internet, which allows people to communicate without any geographical boundaries (Rheingold, 1993). As a consequence, people can constitute a communal society which provides opportunities to exchange information and cultivate mutual friendships (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996).

An online community is a communication network for people who interact with each other based on common interests (Rheingold, 1993). It has been defined in various ways by previous researchers, but common features across definitions include; homogeneity, community relationships, and interactivity among the members (Hillery, 1995). According to Rheingold's (1993) pioneering research of current online communities, an online community is defined as a virtual community where people who have a shared community sense can interact with each other through computer mediated communication (CMC) in cyber space. In addition, Jones (1997) also defined the online community in a similar way; community members have shared interests, experiences and needs and they can obtain valuable resources through the relationships of community members. They also have a sense of belonging through the active participation in communities (Jones, 1997). After all, an online community is a space which can build and share valuable intellectual, emotional and material resources and its meanings among community members (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002).

Online community vs. traditional offline community

Online communities have some significant differences when compared with

traditional offline communities even though the two share a great number of common characteristics. The concept of traditional offline communities has focused on groups that are closely connected with each other geographically due to high communication expenses and speed limitations (Rheingold, 1993). However, with the advent of the Internet, people became able to communicate without spatial and temporal limitations (Rheingold, 1994). The most significant difference of online communities compared to offline communities is that they exist in cyberspace. Therefore, online communities provide high accessibility and convenience to their members. Rheingold (1994) also pointed out other characteristics of online communities that set them apart. Traditional offline communities are usually formed to create a public sense of community based on common geographic locations through face-to-face communication, but online communities are usually formed not according to regional relation but to personal interest, identity, and value through CMC (Rheingold, 1993).

Online Brand Community

An online brand community is an advanced form of a general online community, specifically formed around a commercial brand. Within the past decade, more and more companies have begun to realize the significant value of using online brand communities as marketing tools. McWilliam (2000) pointed out the importance of online brand communities from marketers' perspectives, suggesting that they are excellent strategic marketing tools that allow brands to connect with their enthusiastic potential target consumers.

Types of online brand communities (consumer-generated vs. marketer-generated)

Online brand communities have been classified into two large groups: consumer-generated and marketer-generated (Leimeister, 2004). Customer-generated online brand communities are usually initiated by community members who have a strong affinity for a certain brand. Such enthusiastic consumers have created a great number of online brand

communities voluntarily, without the control of companies, including some for Harley Davidson (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), Saab, Ford Bronco, and Macintosh (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Members of these brand communities provide and seek information and experiences related to products or services; occasionally they trade their used products or make collective purchases as well. They tend to maintain a positive attitude toward and active behavior for both brand and community without receiving any compensation or rewards due to their strong maniac nature; consequently, they can sometimes play the role of advertiser or monitor for the brand they choose.

The other type of online brand community is a marketer-generated one, which is initiated by a company with the intent to build consumer relationships. Marketers began to investigate how they could generate profits by using these consumer-generated online brand communities. Subsequently, they began to create their own online brand communities themselves. Some companies have created their brand communities as a part of their company or product Web sites, while others have built theirs on outside community Web sites and managed them separately. These communities often provide product usage manuals or product upgrade information, share stories about brand history or tradition, and sometimes offer information on various events such as brand festivals or product promotions.

The majority of existing case study analysis about online brand communities has focused primarily on consumer-generated brand communities, to the exclusion of marketer-generated online brand communities. In order to meet marketers' rapidly growing need for and interest in practical uses of online brand communities as effective marketing tools, it would be meaningful to investigate and analyze marketer-generated online brand community cases.

Benefits and characteristics of online brand communities

After marketers began using online brand communities, they started to recognize that marketing activities using these communities are more effective than offline-based marketing activities in terms of customer accessibility, interactivity, and cost-effectiveness (Rheingold, 1993). As a result, marketers improved and changed their existing marketing activities, especially those related to customer service, brand management, and customer relationships. Online brand communities are not only channels for information sharing and friendship building, but they also provide forums in which to exert great influence in marketing activities (Fernback, 1997; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Rheingold, 1994).

Several marketing effects and benefits for both consumers and marketers stem from using online brand communities. These communities provide more significant advantages to marketers than individual consumers because they serve as an important information source for target marketing in relation to marketing perspectives (Kozinets, 2002). Marketers are able to obtain not only valuable and timely information for product or service enhancement by tracing interactions among consumers but also new business ideas and signs of future trends by inviting these opinion leaders to engage in the entire marketing process (Leimeister et al., 2004). This helps marketers understand more about consumers' needs and their attitudes toward brands (McWilliam, 2000).

Furthermore, brand communities can foster consumer brand loyalty by establishing a strong relationship between the brand and consumers. Companies can maintain existing customers and simultaneously create new customers by increasing the brand loyalty of the existing ones. In addition, online brand communities are able to help marketers maintain long-term customer relationships at a lower cost based on this strong brand loyalty. Online brand communities also positively affect attempts to build brand equity. Aaker (1991) conceptualized brand equity with four factors: perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand

awareness, and brand association. Brand communities positively affect each of these four factors, which leads to building and managing brand equity.

Online brand communities can also generate positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) effects through community members' active participation. The communities have more influence over consumers than other types of marketing channels and media as most information in brand communities is based on personal experience, which is more vivid and easily remembered. Consumers also tend to feel that the information from the brand communities, such as product reviews, comments, and recommendations, is much more trustworthy and credible than advertising messages in mass media (Lee & Youn, 2009). The viral marketing effect of the online brand community can be a very important factor for marketers as it strongly impacts not only community members but also other potential consumers outside the community network (Valck, 2009).

Finally, online brand communities can be used as an effective marketing tool to help the company generate revenues directly and indirectly as they are attractive places in which to connect with potential target customer groups that are more active in, highly devoted to, and passionate about their brand (Gruen & Ferguson, 1994). Thus, companies can increase advertising effectiveness by using online brand communities as a highly targeted mass advertising channel at a lower cost; they can even sell their products or services through online brand communities. In addition, companies are able to improve their company or brand images by conducting social responsibility programs or activities in online brand communities.

Consumers also benefit from online brand communities. They can use such communities as a source of knowledge, obtaining complete, credible information related to the company's products or brands in a prompt manner. In addition, consumers have been able

to establish intimate relationships with other members of the community through the medium of a brand, which strengthen the sense of belonging and identity and thereby improve the value of the community. Moreover, online brand communities act as agents of the consumers, helping individual consumers strongly unite with each other and come to have more powerful influence and a greater voice than isolated individual consumers (France & Muller, 1999).

Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) point out that strong brand communities can also be a huge threat to companies if members of brand communities offer stubborn resistance to certain marketing activities or refuse to accept brand changes. Therefore, marketers should try to find a way to minimize the risk factors while maximizing the benefits of online brand communities by understanding key success factors and practical operation strategies and tactics. Online brand communities in particular offer a great number of advantages as well as a few critical disadvantages, thereby calling for careful examination of brand communities in the online environment that will provide useful guidelines for marketers.

Online brand communities in the Korean market

South Korea leads the world in broadband use, with 79.7% of households boasting a broadband Internet connection, compared to only 61.7% of U.S. households (National Internet Development Agency of Korea [NIDA], 2009). As of 2008, the number of Internet users in Korea was estimated at 35.4 million (77.1% of the Korean population), based on the development of Internet infrastructure and usage environment (NIDA, 2008).

This high broadband penetration and leading position in Internet use has resulted in a dramatic increase of online communities in Korea, reaching 1.4 billion as of 2008, with an average increase of 270 million every year since 2006 (NIDA, 2008). Participation level is also very important, as important as the number of online communities, because the success of each community is determined by consumer participation level rather than the

community's characteristics (Dellaert, 2000). Online community participation levels in Korea are also very high; over half of Internet users are online community users (50.2%), and of those, more than half (68.4%) visit their community or communities more than once a week (NIDA, 2008). The percentage of online community users who have used communities in the past year increased from 39.9% in 2007 to 50.2% in 2008, and the use of online communities is projected to increase more rapidly in the near future (NIDA, 2008).

The advent of several giant communities, each with millions of members (e.g., DC Inside, Break Job, MLB Park, SLR Club, and Ruli Web), as well as the large increase in the number of online communities, has drawn marketers' attention toward establishing their own online brand communities that enhance consumer loyalty with a relatively lower cost. Furthermore, marketers have been awakened to the online community's significance, finding that online communities strongly affect consumer purchase decisions. The results of a survey conducted by NIDA on Internet usage shows that over 50% of respondents obtained information about products that they planned to purchase from online communities (such as product reviews, recommendations, and comments) and nearly 40% reported that eWOM directly affects their final purchase decisions (NIDA, 2008).

The background information above points to the prevalent adoption of Internet technology on both marketer and consumer sides in one of the technologically advanced countries, Korea. Therefore, this study intends to provide useful guidelines for both academics and practitioners by examining two notable cases of online brand communities in Korea and analyzing their operation strategies and success factors. Findings of this case analysis will provide insights on how to make the most of online brand communities as a marketing tool, not only for retailers and companies in Korea but also for those in many other countries in which Internet usage and online community activities are now growing.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS

This study aims to discuss how marketers can successfully and effectively use online brand communities as a strategic marketing tool by analyzing two online brand community cases in Korea, drawing valuable insights and suggestions from each case study. Two different types of online brand community cases are analyzed in order to determine how different marketing strategies are applied to successful online brand community operations according to product type and operation purpose. The study will address these key questions:

Key Questions

1. How can online brand communities be created and developed successfully in general, and how can marketers use them effectively as a marketing tool?
2. What kinds of differentiated marketing and management strategies are needed for online brand communities according to the product type?
 - 2A. What are the unique characteristics of electronic product online brand communities, and what are the successful marketing strategies?
 - 2B. What are the unique characteristics of food and beverage online brand communities, and what are the successful marketing strategies?

METHOD

This study involves case analysis of online brand communities of two different product types. With this approach, the study aims to provide marketers with insights into and guidelines for operating successful marketer-generated online brand communities. Thus, this study can provide detailed information and in-depth insights for marketers by analyzing operation strategies and practical tactics of successful online brand communities.

Online Brand Communities for Analysis

Two types of online brand communities were chosen from among the various kinds of online brand communities that are successfully and actively operated in Korea. To select two representative communities for analysis, potential selection groups of online brand communities were identified based on specific criteria. First, the research examined marketer-generated online brand communities that were built and hosted by companies and in which the membership consisted of the companies' consumers. Second, the selection criterion for potential online brand community groups was adapted from a Samsung research report (Lee, Shin, & Jung, 2009) to include those communities that had 1) more than 100 postings in the previous three months and 2) new postings or updated contents in the past week. These criteria resulted in a list of 128 successful online brand communities in Korea as of November 2008 (Lee, et al., 2009).

According to type of industry, the electronic product category (23.18%) and food and beverage product category (18.14%) use online brand communities most frequently and successfully in Korea (Lee et al, 2009). In particular, online brand communities related to electronic products such as MP3 players, computers, mobile phones, and digital cameras are very common and popular in Korea. In addition, food product categories, which are perceived as an industry that faces difficulties in establishing online brand communities, began to use

online brand communities to actively target housewives (Lee et al, 2009). Based on these observations, the current study selected two online brand community cases—one from the electronics industry (i.e., mobile phone) and one from the food products industry—to be the subject of case analyses as marketing and operating strategies differ based on the type of industry and operation purpose. These brand communities were selected based on their demonstration of a sufficient amount of Web traffic, a high level of interaction, a great number of community members and updated messages, and extremely active community activities both online and offline (Kozinets, 2002). The intention herein is to identify success factors and determine how they uniquely apply to each product category.

The Samsung mobile phone online brand community (<http://kr.samsungmobile.com>) is an independent portal site for Samsung's Anycall brand, which provides numerous community functions and product update services as well as sells mobile content such as music, video, ring tones, screen themes, and games. This brand community was launched in 1998; since then, it has grown into one of the biggest community sites, as of October 2009, thanks to the rapid growth in sales of Samsung mobile phone products. Its community members number more than 1.1 billion, with an average 57 million users visiting each day.

The second case is Chungjungwon, a flagship brand for Daesang Co., one of the country's leading food product manufacturers and one that offers a huge variety of consumer products, including traditional Korean hot pepper paste, soybean paste, soy sauces, processed meats, frozen foods, western seasonings, seafood, and more. The Chungjungwon brand community (<http://www.chungjungwon.co.kr>) has experienced rapid growth within a very short period of time since its brand Web site renewal in June 2008. It started as a formal company blog and shifted to a brand community offering information on a variety of events as well as food- and cooking-related information, culminating in a strong consumer brand

relationship and increased eWOM. Since the renewal of the brand community, it has grown rapidly, reaching more than 7 million community members and averaging 1.4 million new members each month. The community averages 6,500 visitors a day, who create more than 1,000 new posts each day.

Data Collection

Observation was conducted on the two online brand community Web sites as well as all discussion postings related to the Samsung mobile and Chungjungwon brand communities over a three-week period, from October to November 2009. Prior to the actual analysis of postings on these sites, the primary Web site menu composition of each brand community was investigated.

The Samsung mobile brand community had 5 main menus and 22 submenus, whereas the Chungjungwon brand community also included 5 main menus but had 27 submenus. These online brand communities also had several common menu compositions, including a place for sharing information related to the product or brand, a place for communication among community members, a place for selling products or services, and a place for subgroups that share common interests. All postings and content from all menus were read and analyzed, focusing on the most recent postings.

Dimensions

This study comprehensively researched and analyzed general site composition and current operation strategies of the two selected online brand communities. In addition, this study emphasized primarily nine dimensions in analyzing these brand communities in order to facilitate a comparison between the communities and obtain insightful implications from the case analysis.

These dimensions were based on the success factors for operating online brand

communities as detailed in previous research conducted by Samsung's economic research institute (Lee et al, 2009). Based on these factors, various types of dimensions of online brand communities, as outlined in existing literature, were added and adjusted for the current study (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Jang, Olfman, Ko, Koh, & Kim, 2008; Leimeister et al., 2004; Lin, 2007; Szmigin, Canning, & Reppel, 2005). Table 1 defines the nine dimensions based on these existing ones from the literature.

Table 1

Dimensions for online brand community in each stage

Stage	Dimension
Community formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Product support function ● Information sharing related to brand or product ● Events
Community maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sharing opinions and experiences ● Supporting subgroups and offline meetings ● Rewards based on members' activity level
Community utilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sales of product ● PR tool ● Reflecting members' opinions or ideas

The primary dimensions can be classified into three categories: community formation, community maintenance, and community utilization. Detailed dimensions are included in each stage. In the following section, the two online brand communities—namely, the Samsung mobile phone and the Chungjungwon food product—will be analyzed and compared based on the dimensions discussed herein.

CASE ANALYSIS

Case 1: Samsung mobile phone online brand community

Information about Samsung Telecommunications

Samsung Telecommunications is one of five business units within Samsung Electronics, belonging to the Samsung Group, and consists of the Mobile Communications Division, Telecommunication Systems Division, Computer Division, MP3 Business Team, Mobile Solution Centre, and Telecommunication Research and Development Centre. Samsung Telecommunications produces a full spectrum of products, from mobile phones and other mobile devices such as MP3 players and laptop computers to telecommunication network infrastructure. The company's headquarters is located in Suwon, South Korea. In 2007, Samsung Telecommunications reported over 40% growth and became the second-largest mobile device manufacturer in the world. Its market share was 14% in 2007, growing from 11.3% in 2006. In 2008, Samsung strengthened its position in the market and attained 15.6% of the world handset market share.

The birth of the Samsung mobile online brand community

The Samsung mobile online brand community is an independent portal site (Figure 1) for Samsung's Anycall brand, which provides numerous community functions and product update services as well as sells mobile content such as music, video, ring tones, screen themes, and games. This online brand community has been continuously updated since it was first launched in 1998. As of October 2009, it had grown into one of the biggest community sites thanks to the rapid growth of Samsung mobile phone products. Its community members number more than 1.1 billion, with an average of 57 million users visiting each day. The Samsung mobile online brand community offers the following key services at its sites: downloading of ring tones, images, screensavers, wallpapers, and mobile games; SMS (Short

Message Service) transmission; as well as information on and images of Samsung mobile phones.

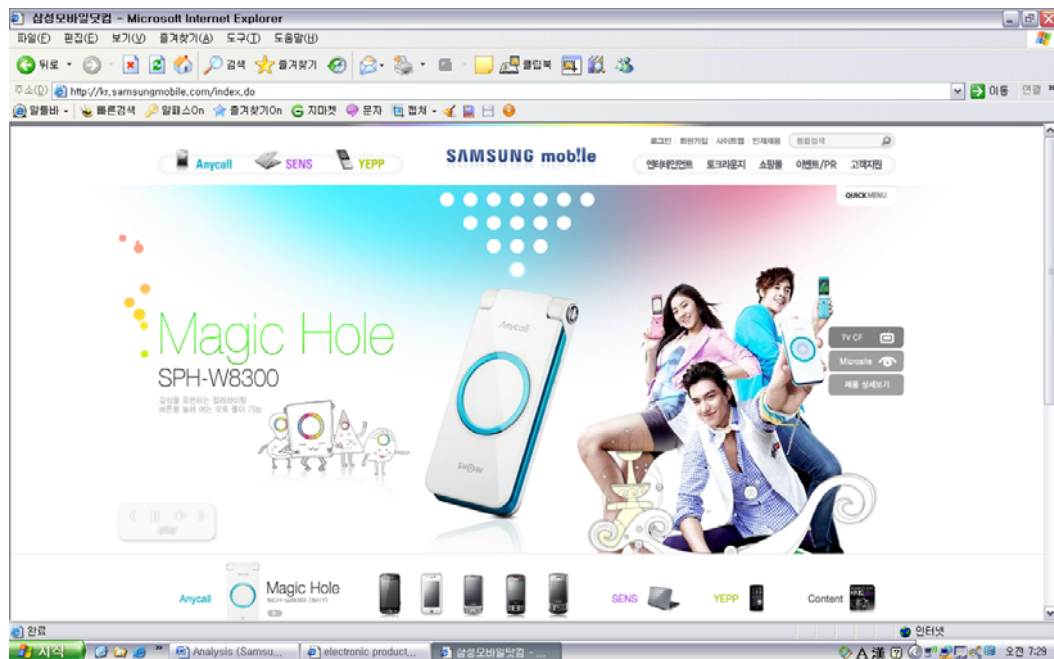


Figure 1. Samsung mobile online brand community main page

How Does the Company Attract Members to the Online Brand Community?

Functional benefits: information related to brand or product

Product information sharing is an important factor in the mobile phone online brand community because the decision to purchase a mobile phone product requires a relatively large amount of high quality, up-to-date, and highly credible information. Thus, the brand community should try to provide meaningful information such as new product news, product upgrade knowledge, and a variety of software as well as product reviews and recommendations to attract consumers.

Product review is one of the main components of the Samsung mobile brand community. Product reviews of all kinds of Samsung mobile phone products are largely divided into two sections: expert reviews and user reviews. Expert reviews look like a product brochure that explains each product's design, functions, and manuals, incorporating

several product images that help consumers thoroughly understand each mobile phone product model. On average, 10 expert reviews are updated each month, garnering an average of 5,000 views (ranging from a minimum of 1,000 to a maximum of 15,000), depending on the product popularity and review quality.

In order to improve information credibility, Samsung incorporated a consumer comment function to follow each expert review posting; there, consumers can provide their positive or negative opinions about expert reviews and add their own perspectives or information on their hands-on purchasing experiences, which can help other viewers evaluate whether expert product reviews are reasonably neutral.

In addition, product reviews are basically listed in order of the posting date. However, consumers can sort the list based on each product category and product model name. This user-friendly function enables consumers to more easily access product information and leads to increased actual product purchases.

User reviews are more frequently updated than expert reviews. On average, 200 user reviews are updated each month—20 times more frequently than expert reviews. In October 2009, more than 230 user reviews were updated. However, the number of views on user reviews is much more limited than on expert reviews, averaging just 50 views (ranging from a minimum of 20 to a maximum of 200) depending on product popularity and review quality. Consumers tend to rely more on expert reviews than user reviews as mobile phones are regarded as a relatively high-involvement product category that requires more professional information, knowledge, and thought processes.

Functional benefits: product support function

A great number of online brand communities for electronic products provide product support functions in order to best support consumers using their products. These communities

that focus on relatively high-involvement product categories such as computers, GPS, MP3 players, and mobile phones can relatively easily bring customers into their brand communities at an early stage. Customers tend to voluntarily visit product Web sites after purchasing products in order to obtain a minimum understanding of the product as well as learn about continuous product maintenance. The primary users of these online brand communities are mostly young adults (aged 10 to 30) who have fanatical characteristics and seek the maximum utility of products that they purchase.

Most consumers who have purchased Samsung mobile phones tend to visit the Samsung mobile phone brand community voluntarily in order to use mobile content and product support functions. In particular, consumers who have purchased a Samsung mobile phone have to visit the Samsung online brand community in order to download the PC Manager content-management software program, which facilitates supporting data management such as pictures, videos, phone number lists, and games. It also helps users with a variety of mobile phone functions, as well as those of other mobile devices, on the computer. Through the community's Download Center menu, consumers can access three functions: software download (PC Manager), the mobile phone upgrading program, and the mobile phone manual. This free download service is beneficial for both the company and consumers as it entices consumers to visit the brand community and encourages them to purchase mobile content by providing a basic online infrastructure that facilitates downloading content and programs. In effect, the Samsung mobile phone online brand community attracts consumers to the brand community at an early stage.

How Does the Company Maintain Active Participation in the Online Brand Community?

By offering product support functions and information that maximizes product utility, online brand communities for electronic products can attract consumers to their Web sites

fairly easily. However, maintaining consumers and getting them to continuously participate in community activities are more challenging tasks. Consumers usually visit the online brand community on an intermittent basis, according to their needs, rather than on a regular basis; most are short-term consumers who visit the Web site simply to download a program, product update, or product repair and do not revisit the Web site until they need these things again. Therefore, in order to encourage ongoing visits to the online brand community, marketers should provide strong motivations that attract consumers and encourage them to actively participate in community activities.

Social interaction: Information sharing and entertainment

One way to maintain active participation in the online brand community is to provide useful information and a variety of content to meet consumers' needs and interests on an ongoing basis. Current Internet users prefer to visit an online brand community that offers one-stop information resources, which means consumers can obtain a variety of necessary information in one online brand community.

For example, one of the largest user-generated online brand communities in Korea, DC Inside (www.dcinside.com), effectively demonstrated the significance of providing a variety of information in creating a successful online brand community. Since being established in 1999 as a community of interest for discussion specifically pertaining to digital cameras and photography, it has actively attracted consumers by accumulating a variety of information and content, even content not directly related to digital cameras (e.g., socio-politics, science and sports news, electronic device shopping, entertainment, travel, and food information). Such variety even attracts consumers who are not currently interested in digital cameras. As a result, it has become a giant community with more than 300,000 visitors daily, offering more than 20 million images and pieces of content in 1,000 galleries and discussion

boards.

Following this example, the Samsung mobile online brand community tried to attract consumers by providing not only information and resources related to products and services but also a variety of information not directly related to its products, including free mobile content such as news, fitness and diet tips, food and cooking information, and movies and music videos (Figure 2).

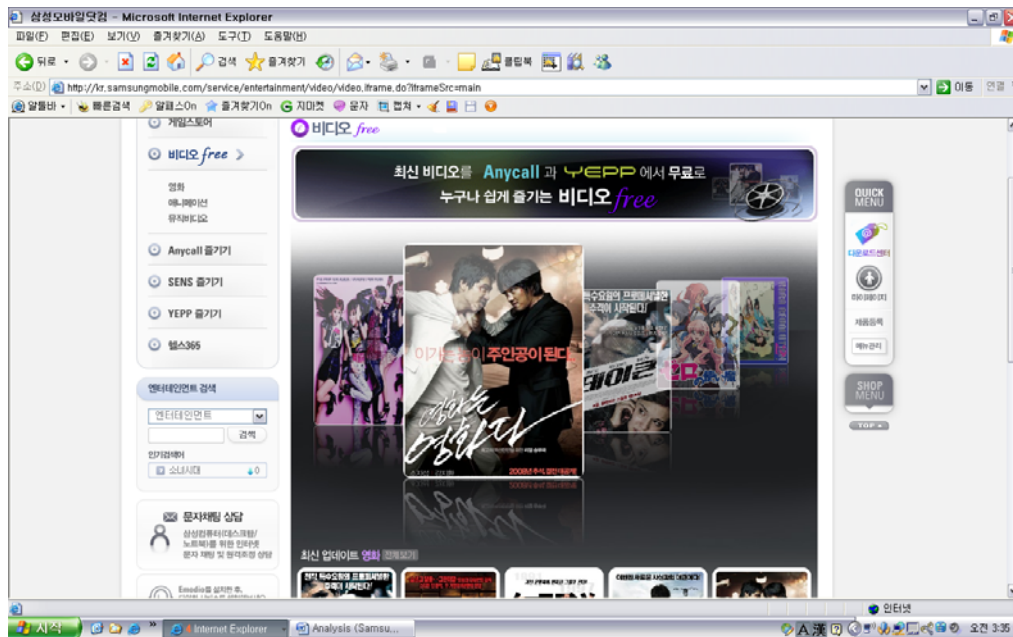


Figure 2. Free videos – movies, animations and music videos

However, it is difficult for an online brand community to provide up-to-date and high quality content on a continuous basis. There is a limit to the online brand community's ability to provide one-sided content without reproducing user-generated content among consumers. Users' voluntary activities are essential for the continuation of the online brand community. Therefore, the Samsung mobile online brand community provides a way for users to add and upload their own pictures and video content to the online brand community, in addition to accessing the large amount of free professional mobile content. Community members not only request that the company upload content that they need and ask for technical support to

translate their ideas into reality, but they also produce high quality user-generated content (Figure 3) and share their content with other community members. Thus, the Samsung mobile online brand community offers a place in which members can interact and share content with other community members by opening potential content and device applications that make it possible for users to modify and update content themselves.

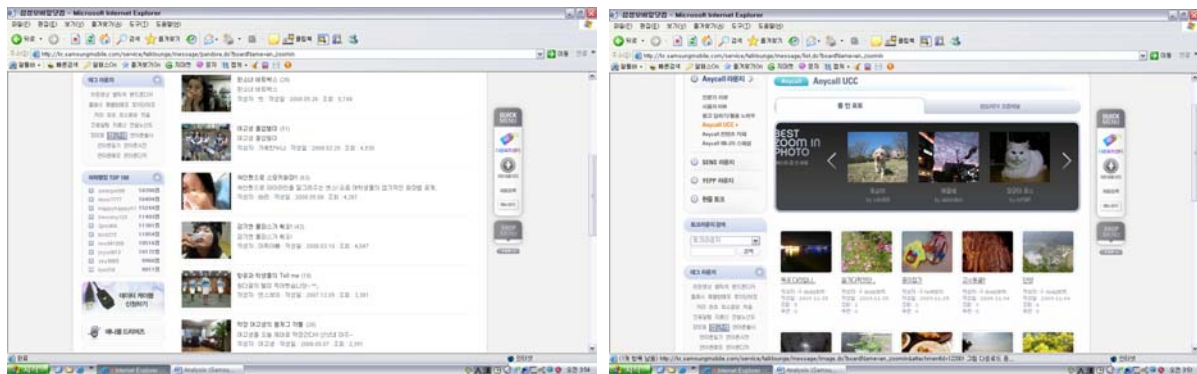


Figure 3. User created contents – pictures and videos

Rewards: Point System and Fan Special

Samsung Telecommunications tries to maintain active participation in its online brand community by using a reward system. Consumers earn 3,000 points when they register for the online brand community after purchasing a mobile phone, and they can use these points to purchase premium services in the community. They earn additional points according to their community participation level, such as logging in to the Web site, telling friends about the Samsung mobile online brand community, posting a message on the bulletin board, participating in Samsung's surveys, or posting a comment or recommendation on product review sites. The more activities they do, the more points they get. Consumers can use these points to download items such as ring tones, images, and content; points are deducted according to the amount required for the service being used. In addition, consumers are encouraged to use these points because accumulated points automatically expire after six months. Thus, consumers maintain active participation in the Samsung mobile online brand

community not only to earn more points but also to spend the points they have.

Furthermore, in addition to the points system, the Samsung mobile online brand community uses a distinctive system called power, which refers to consumers' participation level and time spent on the Web site. The more time consumers spend on the site, the higher their power level goes. Consumers can earn power by participating in activities in the online brand community, such as posting comments on a discussion board and participating in events. They can also earn power by completing activities in which they have to spend points, such as purchasing mobile content. For example, downloading a 16-poly ring tone costs consumers 60 points, but they earn 10 units of power when they do so. Consumers cannot buy anything with their power, but they are rewarded when their power reaches a certain level.

Each month, the Samsung mobile online brand community selects the top 100 members (Figure 4) ranked by power level (average 4,000 power units) and upgrades their membership level from "friend" or "member" to "fan." A member is a registered user with a Samsung mobile phone, and a friend is a registered user without a phone or with another manufacturer's mobile phone. Members have access to all areas of the Web site, whereas friends have limited access to certain services. Meanwhile, fans can earn up to 10,000 points and also enjoy numerous special benefits in the online brand community. For example, they can have priority rights to be invited to offline events or new product experience opportunities and have a higher chance of winning prizes given out during the events. Furthermore, the Samsung mobile online brand community offers a special place that only fans can log on to and use, called Fan Special. Fans can share high quality information with other fans through discussion boards, suggestion boards, a data room, and the gallery of fan specials. Thus, the reward system of points and power units as well as different levels of

membership provide motivation for community members to participate more actively in the online brand community in order to enjoy special benefits.

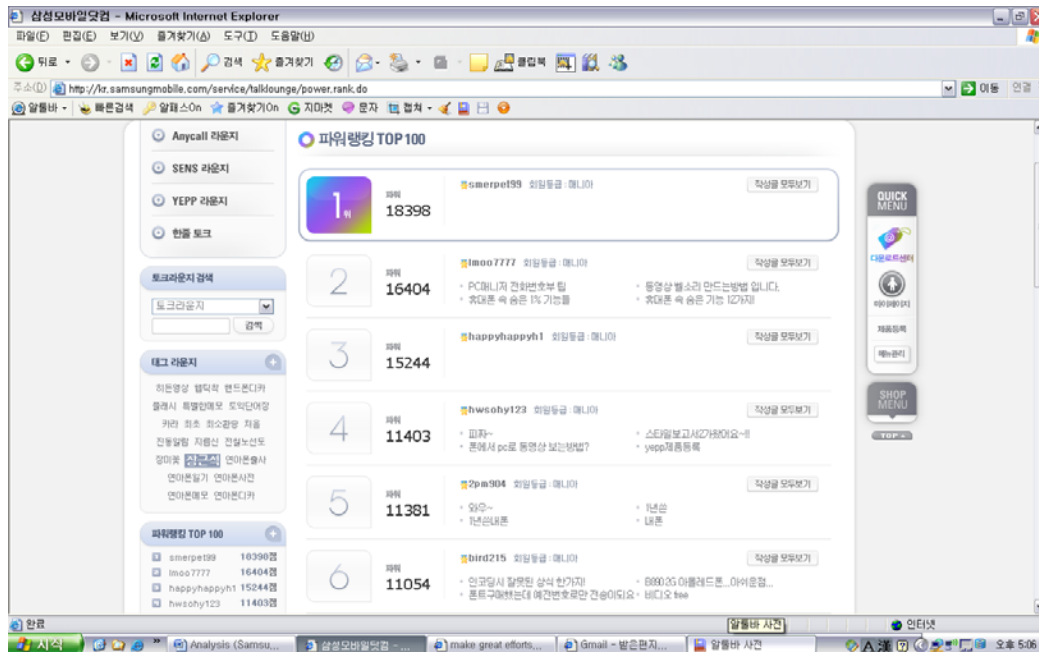


Figure 4. Power ranking Top 100 – Fan Special

How can the Company Use Online Brand Community Members as a Marketing Tool?

Sales of product

Samsung mobile uses its online brand community as one of its sales channels for promoting its mobile phones, mobile phone accessories, and mobile content (Figure 5), ultimately leading to increased company revenues. Samsung provides a variety of mobile content (e.g., mobile games, ring tones, wallpapers, animations, videos, and phone software) through the online brand community, as well as product information and product support functions. The Samsung mobile online brand community offers basic content for free to attract consumers while charging for high quality premium content to increase its revenues. Some argue that online brand communities should provide content for free in order to engage the community. However, consumers are willing to pay for content if it is high quality and perceived as valuable. Therefore, the online brand community is able to not only increase

sales revenues by selling contents but also build a positive community brand image by satisfying consumers' needs for high quality content.

The success of content sales depends on content quality. Samsung mobile tries to secure high quality content through its strong business relationship with small and large mobile content providers. In addition, it increases the competitiveness and effectiveness of the community by unifying its online sales channels into one platform—namely, the Samsung mobile online brand community site. Samsung mobile makes great efforts to provide unique content that can connect with Samsung mobile devices in order to differentiate it from other portal sites or online brand communities that offer mobile content. Furthermore, Samsung mobile uses the online brand community as a way to maintain members' active participation, giving them a strong motivation to collect points with which they can purchase and download high quality mobile content rather than spending money.



Figure 5. Mobile Game Contents

Reflecting members' opinions or ideas

The Samsung mobile online brand community operates “Anycall Dreamers” on its

Web site (Figure 6), which is a product experience consumer group that evaluates Samsung mobile products or services from a professional consumer's point of view, suggests new marketing ideas, and promotes Samsung mobile products in public. Samsung mobile recruits a variety of people, from early mobile phone adaptors to people who have never used a Samsung mobile phone, in order to enable the group to speak for the actual consumers. Anycall Dreamers are recruited once a year and can actively participate through the year. The first Anycall Dreamer group began operations in 2005, and the current the sixth incarnation of Anycall Dreamers have a wide field of marketing activities in 2009.

These Anycall Dreamers groups play a variety of roles and activities, which include public relations to drive media buzz and create word-of-mouth, opinion leaders to lead the Samsung mobile phone usage culture, and idea banks of new product development and service improvements. They are one of the remarkable success cases of "prosumer marketing" in Korea. Samsung extended the scope of their application to include product production, distribution, and customer service as well as new product development. In addition, they have achieved a win-win outcome for both the company and consumers: consumers can achieve self-fulfillment and receive financial benefits, and the company can use these professional consumers to strengthen its competitiveness. Prosumer marketing is more effective for IT product companies because they are generally not designed to adapt in a fast-paced, ever-changing market environment. Samsung mobile has enjoyed huge success in prosumer marketing by providing a forum for the Anycall Dreamers to communicate and interact with one another and the information they need to complete monthly team assignments. In addition, Samsung mobile encourages these prosumer groups' active participation by defining them as "fun marketers," providing them opportunities to enjoy activities through the marketing participation process, and leading a competition among the

prosumer groups rather than just collecting their opinions.

Furthermore, the most important factor of the successful Samsung mobile prosumer marketing is that the company sensitively and immediately responds to the prosumers' needs and fully reflects their opinions in the actual marketing strategies, leading to a strong, trusting, and cooperative relationship between the company and its prosumer groups. For example, Samsung mobile actually changed its corporate Web site design and online brand community composition in response to Anycall Dreamers' ideas and opinions. In addition, the fourth Anycall Dreamers provided more than 100 ideas about the new mobile phone model Haptic after using it for three months, and 19 of those ideas were actually reflected in product development of Haptic in 2008.



Figure 6. Anycall Dreamers prosumer marketing

Case 2: The Chungjungwon Online Brand Community

Information about Chungjungwon

Chungjungwon is the flagship brand of all the food product business for the Daesang Corporation, which produces and sells various food products, ranging from the traditional paste assortments such as Soonchang Red Pepper Paste and Hatsaldameun Soy Sauce to instant foods, western foods, processed meats, frozen foods, vinegars, and agricultural and marine food products such as salt fermentations and seasonings. Chungjungwon was introduced in 1996.

Daesang Corporation has eight product brands under the Chungjungwon family brand, some of them being Soonchang, Hatdam, O'Food, Matsunsang, Hong Cho, and Misoga. Its Korean hot pepper paste product brand, Soonchang, is regarded as the best Korean hot pepper paste and has been selected as the top product in the food brand power category by the Korea Management Association (KMA) for ten consecutive years. In addition, in the soy sauce category, Hatdam contributed to improving the cooking culture in Korea. Upon recognizing the harmfulness of acid-hydrolyzed soy sauce early on, Daesang Corporation made a bold business decision to withdraw itself from the production of mixed soy sauce, in which acid-hydrolyzed soy sauce is contained in great quantities. The company has consistently warned the public about the harmfulness of acid-hydrolyzed soy sauce and encouraged the consumption of brewed soy sauce through the "Clean Promise of Hatsaldameun Soy Sauce" campaign it has run since October 2001, through which it changed consumers' perceptions of soy sauce. At the same time, it gained the leadership position in the brewed soy sauce market by creating a sensation with its 100% naturally brewed soy sauce, Hatsaldameun Soy Sauce, defeating Sempio Soy Sauce.

In addition, the company has released about 30 organically processed foods under its

organic brand name Chungjungwon O'Food in order to increase Chungjungwon's brand value. Its new Blue Ocean product, "Drinking Vinegar—Hong Cho," which was first introduced in 2005, is leading the vinegar beverage market in Korea. This market averages income of 50 billion Korean Won (KRW), and Chungjungwon recorded its annual sales as 30 billion KRW. Furthermore, the company started the process of developing a new market by introducing Matsunsang, a third-generation natural ingredient seasoning, on October 3, 2007. As the seasoning is made from only fresh and clean ingredients without any artificial additives, Matsunsang achieved annual sales of 12 billion KRW in 2008 largely by garnering the attention of housewives who prefer a health-oriented food culture. It was regarded as the signal of Daesang Corporation's realization of its vision as the "Company that Creates a Happy Future through the Healthy Food Culture."

The birth of the Chungjungwon online brand community

Chungjungwon's online brand community was created in June 2008 by renewing corporate blogs that had operated only perfunctorily. The role of the brand community and the purpose of its operation were expanded to include building long-term customer relationships and increasing consumer brand loyalty by creating positive eWOM. Since the renewal of the brand community, it has grown rapidly, reaching more than 7 million community members and averaging 1.4 million new members each month. The community averages 6,500 visitors a day, who create more than 1,000 new posts each day.

The Chungjungwon online brand community enjoyed huge success in a relatively short time since it focused on attracting consumers in the early stage of launching a brand community. The Chungjungwon brand community formed the foundation for rapid growth by integrating numerous consumer and marketer-generated online brand communities related to its products or brands on several platforms into a single online brand community platform.

Another reason for its rapid growth is that it promotes a variety of events related to cooking or healthy lifestyles. Furthermore, the administrators of Chungjungwon's online brand community have plans to upgrade it to a multifunctional brand community by supporting consumer-centered subgroup meetings, providing a variety of events and incentives, and adding product sales functions by unifying the online platforms of the Daesang shopping mall.

As shown in Figure 7, Chungjungwon's online brand community has 5 main menus and 27 submenus. The Web site design and content composition have satisfied the target consumers' specific needs and interests and are ideal for promoting products, services, special events, and specific brand offerings.

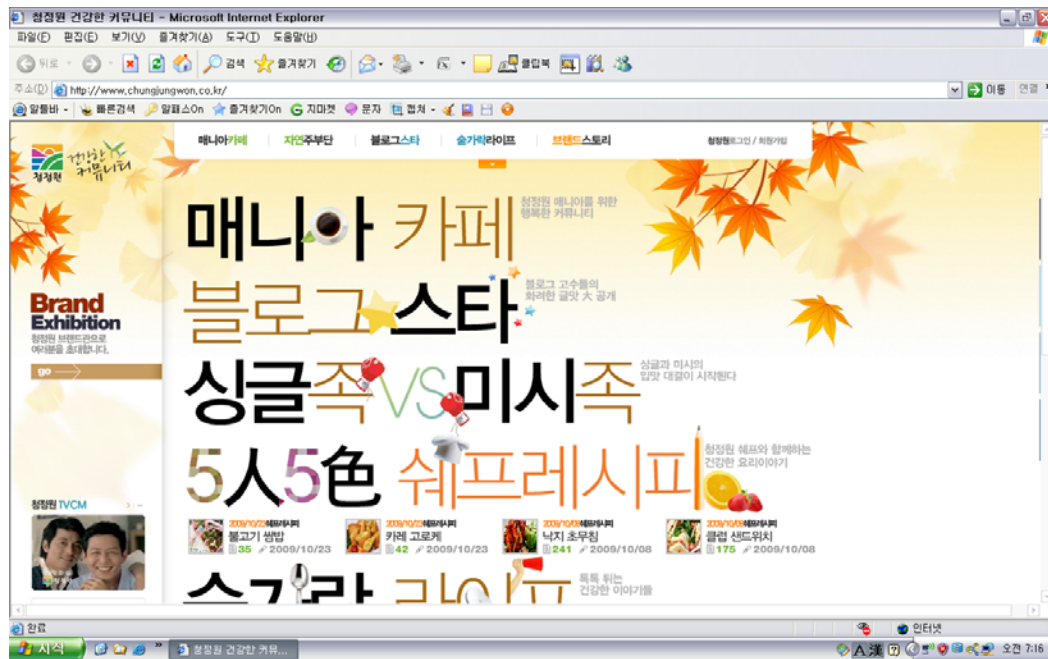


Figure 7. Chungjungwon online brand community main page

How Does the Company Attract Members to the Online Brand Community?

Functional benefits: Information related to brand or product

Chungjungwon's online brand community provides product information through its Brand Exhibit and Mania Café. The Brand Exhibit site (Figure 8) shows each of the eight product brands in one platform that looks like an art exhibition and introduces each product

under its brand name. The design of this Brand Exhibit site is very sophisticated and customized so that the target consumers—housewives—can understand its brands and products just by looking through its gallery.

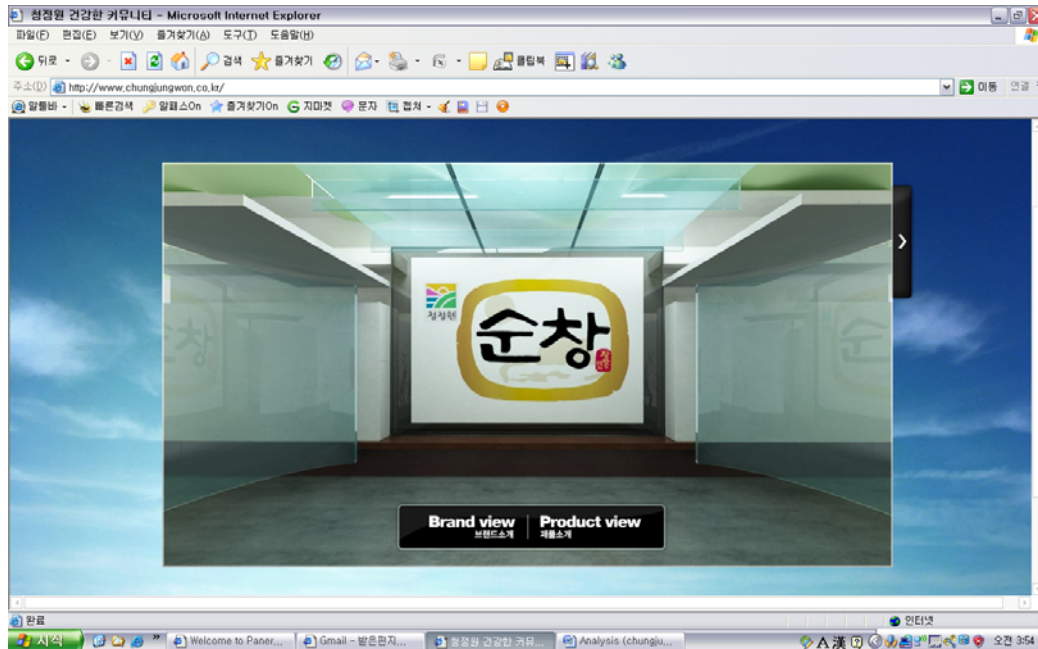


Figure 8. Brand Exhibit

In addition, Chungjungwon offers product-related information through Mania Café (Figure 9), which is composed of four product brands: Soonchang, Hatdam, Matsunsang, and Hong Cho. Each Mania Café provides detailed information about the products, programs, and events that elicit customer participation. For example, they offer free products and recipes and then collect consumer opinions and views on a product after they have actually used it. Furthermore, they select the most active members every month and give them some incentives such as a gift coupon, free products, or department vouchers.



Figure 9. Mania Café

Functional benefits: Event and promotion

One of the key success factors of Chungjungwon's online brand community is a variety of events and promotions because these events motivate consumers to register and become community members. Through special promotions, Chungjungwon offers brand revitalization, increases brand loyalty, and encourages consumers' participation. The incentives, events, and promotions are not limited to free products but include cash awards, cultural experiences, and education opportunities, which attract the company's target consumers and increase their participation. For example, the Chungjungwon brand community is promoting "Hatdam Soy Sauce English Camp" from October to December 2009, which is arousing great interest among young housewives. The company sells Hatdam soy sauce with a scratch-off lottery ticket that offers a set of free soy sauce products for 1,000 consumers and lottery numbers for everyone who purchases Hatdam soy sauce. In addition, consumers are encouraged to register their lottery numbers through the online brand community or a text message to enter a raffle for a winter vacation to an Australia English

camp or a village English camp. Consumers who do not purchase Hatdam soy sauce have a chance to win this English camp lottery by sending a text message about the event to at least three friends (Figure 10). This new approach to promoting events has been a huge success.

One reason for the success of this event is that education is the number one interest and concerns of housewives in South Korea, especially early childhood English education. Thus, this English camp event demonstrates the importance of providing incentives to their target consumers to generate traffic to the sites, and turn visitors into members. Thus, marketers should find out what motivates their targets to participate in the event and join the community.



Figure 10. English Camp Event using SMS text message

One of the most distinctive events of the Chungjungwon online brand community is a “home party.” A community manager selects 12 hosts for home parties each month from among community members who apply to host one and submit detailed party plans. The community pays all expenses for the party preparation, and the hosts have to purchase Chungjungwon products with the sponsor’s money to make food for the party; invite guests

such as their friends, families, and neighbors and give them Chungjungwon products as party favors. Home parties have become popular among members of the Chungjungwon online brand community and have increased the sales of Chungjungwon products and brands. These events can help to increase marketing effectiveness through positive word-of-mouth, and community members can serve as brand advocates by introducing and promoting the products to their guests. Through these home party events, Chungjungwon has noted increased marketing effectiveness because consumers are more likely to trust peer recommendations than marketing or advertising messages. In addition, community members usually become more enthusiastic and loyal after hosting a home party, and the party guests, as potential customers, are more likely to attend other home party events and join the Chungjungwon online brand community afterward.

However, it would be almost impossible to develop and execute these highly effective event promotion strategies without an organization or management team that is wholly responsible for its online brand community's strategies and operations. Chungjungwon operates an online marketing team, which is in charge of the online brand community's operation and management. The team is quick to update content and to plan events on a regular basis to stimulate the online brand community.

How Does the Company Maintain Active Participation in the Online Brand Community?

Social interaction: Information Sharing

Chungjungwon's online brand community provides information on cooking, living, housework, and lifestyles in addition to its brand and product information and offers a forum for community members to share information and opinions. In particular, Chungjungwon's brand community can increase consumers' interest by offering highly customized information to young housewives.

One of the main topics is cooking. Chungjungwon's online brand community offers gourmet recipes and cooking information, created and contributed by five professional chefs (Figure 11) to be shared among community members in addition to homemade recipes submitted by the members themselves. Between 5 and 10 recipes are posted by professional chefs each month, with instructions including detailed ingredients, cooking know-how, and tips. In addition, community members can ask the professional chefs any questions they have about cooking.

Community members can post their own recipes to share with other members. Chungjungwon's brand community selects the four best recipes each month and gives each of the people who sent them a \$50 voucher. In October 2009, more than 260 recipes were posted; usually, 200 to 300 recipes are posted each month. Community members can communicate with one another by replying to comments and opinions about each recipe. In addition, these recipes induce community members to visit the brand community on a daily basis and invite new community members to participate in it. Furthermore, this recipe sharing has revitalized the online brand community and increased sales; community members are more likely to purchase Chungjungwon brand products when following the recipes.



Figure 11. Professional Chef Recipe

Chungjungwon's online brand community allows its members to express their opinions and thoughts on discussion boards. Each month has a theme; some previous themes have been "My wedding story," "Superstar in my neighborhood," and "Early childhood education." In addition, community members can share their daily lives in chat rooms. The participation rate is very high; more than 100 comments are posted each day, and most of the postings have a great number of reader comments. The community managers select the two best postings every month and give each of the people who wrote them a \$50 voucher.

Social interaction: Subgroups and offline meetings

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Chungjungwon's online brand community is that it supports regional subgroups (Figure 12) and offline meetings. These regional subgroups have had enthusiastic community support since they launched in November 2008. They are in Seoul, Gyeonggi, Chungcheong, Jeolla, Gyeongsang, Gangwon, Jeju, and Los Angeles. When community members register for this online brand community, they are automatically assigned to a subgroup, and each subgroup has more than 10,000

members.



Figure 12. Regional Sub-groups

These subgroups can develop strong bonds not only by sharing opinions online but also by meeting face-to-face. For example, the Chungjungwon brand community offers an offline cooking class for each regional subgroup twice a month. Twenty community members in each subgroup are invited to participate in the class, which is led by a professional chef. Furthermore, the Chungjungwon brand community provides offline seminars, monthly meetings, and annual anniversary parties to encourage community members to meet each other in recognition of the fact that maintaining an interpersonal connectivity among its members helps build stronger, long-term customer relationships. Therefore, by connecting the virtual and the real world, members may become more united and contribute to the online brand community (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996).

How Does the Company Use Online Brand Community Members as a Marketing Tool?

PR and advertising

Chungjungwon's online brand community recruited a "housewives product

experience group” to try Chungjungwon products and present ideas or opinions for product development in exchange for incentives. This group has been a huge success; approximately 3.3 million housewives applied to participate during a three-month recruiting period.

The members of the housewives product experience group also have monthly assignments. For October 2009, they had to upload a recent Chungjungwon TV commercial along with their comments to their own blogs or home pages and then link that URL to the Chungjungwon online brand community page. Ten members who completed the assignment received \$30 vouchers. This kind of assignment is very effective not only in promoting Chungjungwon’s new TV commercial and products but also in spreading eWOM among its target groups.

Moreover, some members of the housewives product experience group appeared in TV commercials (Figure 13). These commercials increase advertising effects by amplifying the public interest and increase participation in online brand community activities.



Figure 13. Consumer TV Commercial

Reflecting members' opinions or ideas

Chungjungwon's online brand community welcomes ideas and opinions about Chungjungwon products, packaging, and service. This idea-generation channel is helpful to both the company and to consumers. Community members not only have a way to present their ideas, opinions, complaints, and suggestions directly to the company but also can receive financial benefits, in the form of \$100 vouchers, if their ideas are selected as the best idea of the month. In addition, the company can develop new products and business and improve its product packaging or services. Information from community members is very valuable and helpful since it comes from people who have actually used the products. The company can build strong, long-term relationships with its consumers and increase brand loyalty by showing community members that their ideas and opinions affect the company's operations and product development.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Through the rapid development of digital economy based on the Internet, online communities have been providing a great deal of new marketing opportunities. In particular, online brand communities, which are formed on the basis of attachment to a product or brand, are very helpful to increase brand loyalty and strengthen brand equity by building strong relationships between brand and community members. However, most previous studies of online brand community have centered on the early stage of the community formation, and are limited to investigate community characteristics and effectiveness from the perspective of relationship maintenance and enhancement. For this reason, the current study analyzed two cases of online brand communities – Samsung mobile and Chungjungwon online brand communities, according to three broad stages of the development process of online brand community: community formation, community maintenance, and community utilization. Also, the successful strategies and important implications of the online brand communities in each stage are discussed along the nine dimensions of success factors.

Table 2

Dimensions and relevant items in each online brand community

Stage	Dimension	Samsung mobile	Chungjungwon
Community formation	Product support function	Download Center	-
	Information related to brand or product	Expert and user review	Brand Exhibit, Brand café
	Events		English camp
Community maintenance	Sharing opinions and experiences	Free contents, UCC	Cooking and recipe discussion board
	Formation of sub-groups and supporting offline meetings	-	Regional subgroups
	Rewards based on members' activity levels	Point and power system Fan membership	-
Community utilization	Sales of product	Sales of mobile phone and contents	-
	PR tool	-	Housewives community member CF
	Reflecting members' opinions and ideas	Anycall Dreamers	Contests

In the initial stage of community formation, there has been a great deal of effort put into inducing consumers to visit online brand communities, including providing product support functions, product information, and a variety of events. In the second stage, marketers have been focused on increasing social interactions among community members or between the members and the brand by encouraging opinion sharing or subgroup meetings in order to maintain community members' active participation and increase their brand loyalty. In addition, online brand communities can be used as an effective marketing and PR tool, as well as a sales channel of products and services.

Samsung Mobile Online Brand Community

The Samsung mobile online brand community increases the company's capacity for advertising and selling its products in well-defined segments. It attracts consumers to

Samsung's Web site by providing product information and product support functions. Then, it also provides rewards based on members' activity levels, and benefits vary according to the level of membership. These differentiated treatments for community members motivate them to participate in community activities more frequently. This approach resulted in increased product sales through the community and improved product quality through incorporating members' opinions and ideas. In other words, the overall strategy for Samsung mobile online brand community focuses on the company's product in each stage.

Chungjungwon Online Brand Community

The Chungjungwon online brand community, by contrast, draws consumers' attention by providing a variety of information that is not directly related to its products but that is attractive enough to arouse consumers' interest. In addition, it is more focused on social interaction among the community members as a means to maintain an active online brand community, and it does this by supporting subgroup activities and offline meetings. That is to say, the main purpose of the online brand community is not just to increase the company's product sales but to create a strong sense of community that can affect members' loyalty to the community as well as the brand.

In sum, the findings suggest that there are differences in community development and management strategies, according to the characteristics of product category and community members, as well as in the purpose of the community operation. In this case analysis, the online brand communities were categorized as the electronic product category and the food product category online brand community. The first type of community connects its online support functions to its online brand community to maximize the product utility and to use community members to increase product sales and discuss promotions. The other type of online brand community is more focused on generating social interaction among members

not only by sharing information that is not directly related to its products or the brand but also by having subgroup or offline meetings to enhance mutual friendships among the community members. Therefore, marketers should consider appropriate marketing strategies and tactics for their online brand communities according to their product type and category: high or low involvement and cognitive or emotional product category.

DISCUSSION

The case analysis of successful online brand communities has allowed us to understand that functional benefits and social interactions between brands and consumers, facilitated by online brand communities, might offer a great deal of marketing opportunities and satisfy both the company and its consumers.

From a functional perspective, it is critical that a company provide a variety of high quality and up-to-date information, product support functions, and highly targeted, relevant events to its consumers, especially in the initial stage of the community formation. Consumers also enjoy the ability to find information about their topics of interest in discussion boards provided by the online brand community as well as to post their opinions and perspectives, and share information, experience, and expertise. In addition, different functional benefits are provided by the online brand communities depending on their product type. The electronic product category, which is typically a high-involvement and cognitive product, offers more professional and credible information about the product to attract consumers' attention, while a low-involvement and emotional product type such as one in the food and beverage product category tends to entice consumers by providing opportunities to share their stories and information that they are interested in, such as cooking tips, recipes, and tidbits on lifestyle and social issues. Furthermore, the product support functions such as software downloading programs, product manuals, and product maintenance services are very important factors in the efforts of electronic product online brand communities to attract consumers to their communities. The food and beverage product online brand communities, on the other hand, continuously provide a great number of events that are designed to arouse consumers' interest in the community as well as in the products.

However, offering functional value is not enough to maintain an active online brand

community. If a company took that approach, members could end up using the online brand community only to obtain information or download product support functions without actually participating in the community. In order to achieve continued success, the online brand community must also support social interaction (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003). As seen in Chungjungwon's case, the active interaction among community members can be achieved by supporting subgroup activities and offline meetings. In particular, regional, community-based face-to-face offline meetings can enhance the relationships among the online community members by engaging them in both online and offline activities. As a result, online brand communities become venues in which intense relationships emerge voluntarily among members (Mathwick, 2006). This strong sense of community and strengthened relationships among the members can reinforce their loyalty for the community, as well as create brand loyalty (Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004).

The online brand community for the electronic product, on the other hand, uses different approaches to increase social interaction between community members. It developed a differentiated membership system that offers special benefits only for those exclusive members who have achieved high-level membership and a place for them to share information and interact; it does not provide social interaction opportunities to all members of the community. This differentiated treatment can motivate community members in general to earn entry into the exclusive member group and ultimately increases active participation in community.

In summary, online brand communities are not valuable in an informational sense, but they may be even more valuable for the social support and interaction opportunities they offer. The possibility of forming relationships with others draws members back to the online brand community on a frequent and regular basis and leads them to become loyal consumers.

Marketing Implications

The present study has some important implications for marketers. The online brand communities of Samsung mobile and Chungjungwon offer many useful lessons for those who wish to accrue brand benefits through such a community. Connecting the online brand community site and the social aptitude of community participants potentially creates a new marketing tool (McWilliam, 2000). This case study has shown that proper operation strategies and tactics for online brand communities, according to product and consumer characteristics, are crucial for the development of a successful online brand community.

First, marketers should understand the significance of the online brand community as a low-cost and high-efficiency marketing tool. As online brand communities increase social interactions between marketers and consumers as well as between consumers and consumers, they play a vital role in developing and enhancing long-term consumer relationships and creating brand loyalty with lower costs than mass media marketing (Kozinets, 1999).

As this study's findings suggest, marketers should understand that different operation strategies and success factors need to be applied for each different type of online brand community based on the industry category, product and consumer characteristics, and the objectives of the community. Thus, marketers need to identify what options most appeal to their target audience and should develop customized strategies and tactics to facilitate consumer participation by satisfying their specific needs.

Community formation. In order to make an online brand community successful, it is essential to secure enthusiastic members in the early stages of community formation. Unlike consumer-generated online brand communities, marketer-generated online brand communities should make more efforts to foster these enthusiastic members in the beginning since these enthusiastic members' active participation in the community can invite new

members to the community and ultimately broaden the community member base. Furthermore, community managers are limited both qualitatively and quantitatively in their ability to provide content and promote events continuously. Thus, it is desirable for marketers to develop ways to make communities grow on their own using these enthusiastic members.

Community maintenance. It is more important to turn visitors into members of the community and maintain their active and continuous participation than to just generate traffic to the site consisting of only short-stay visitors. Attracting consumers to online brand community sites and having them register with it is relatively easy by repeatedly promoting events, but making them into enthusiastic members in the online brand community is more difficult. In order to achieve this goal, marketers should set up systematic routes that can transform their consumers from simple visitors to enthusiastic community members with active participation. There are several ways to maintain active participation in an online brand community that marketers should carefully consider.

From a consumer perspective, marketers' or other community members' prompt response and feedback to their participation is a very effective way to increase their willingness to participate in the community. In addition, as the findings of the Samsung mobile case study suggest, the development of a reward program based on members' participation level is a good strategy to increase members' interest in becoming part of a community and returning to the site regularly. Thus, marketers must find out what motivates their target audience to participate in the online brand community.

Furthermore, social interactions among the members play a vital role in retaining community members and increasing their participation, ultimately making them highly loyal to the brand. Thus, marketers should provide consumers a common space to give and receive information and perspectives about the product and their own interests, to strengthen

relationships among members, and to help in keeping the community active. At the same time, marketers should aggressively support community members' subgroup activities and offline meetings to create a strong sense of community for the members.

Community utilization. Once consumers become active members of the community, the company can obtain long-term benefits such as improved relationships between individual consumers, as well as between the consumers and the brand, foster consumer brand loyalty, and ultimately strengthen the general positive attitude toward the company (Rosenbaum, Ostrom, & Kuntze, 2005). The company can also use community members as marketing resources for relatively short-term benefits, such as promoting its brands, developing new products, and selling products to increase company revenues.

The online brand community can be used as an effective promotion and advertising channel for a company's products and services as well as its brands. Marketers can take advantage of the target marketing effects with a relatively low cost compared to that of mass media advertising since the community members already have a more favorable attitude toward its product and brand than does the general consumer. Thus, marketers should investigate unique and creative ways to promote—to the public and to community members—their products and the community itself through the online brand community. As shown in Chungjungwon case, for example, marketers can use their enthusiastic community members as participants in TV commercials, giving more opportunities for community members to truly engage in the company's marketing and arouse more interest of noncommunity members in the product and in the community itself.

Moreover, marketers can identify consumers' needs and reflect consumers' opinions and ideas directly in the product development, service improvement, and company operation through the online brand community. Consumer participation through online brand

communities is growing; as shown in the case analysis of this study, Samsung mobile has been operating prosumer groups, called Anycall Dreamers, in its online brand community, and Chungjungwon also offers a variety of consumer contests to obtain consumers' opinions and ideas. The online brand community is the best channel for consumer participation. This active participation of consumers is helpful not only to make a more sophisticated product but also to establish a strong bond between consumers and company.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations should be considered. The findings of this study are limited in their ability to be generalized due to the small number of cases. This study analyzed only two different types of online brand communities: Samsung mobile and Chungjungwon. Consequently, the ability to gain a general idea of the characteristics of online brand communities for other types of product categories and the successful operation strategies for each category is limited. In addition, applying these research findings to other types of online brand communities in high- or low-involvement product categories may be difficult because this study restricted its focus to only one online brand community in each category. Therefore, further research is needed to determine whether findings of this study are universally applicable to online brand communities of other product types in the FCB Grid.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are limited by the fast-paced nature of the Internet. The online brand communities may have changed since the study was conducted. In addition, the analysis developed is qualitative research, which relies on observation and interpretation and is admittedly value-bound, and is considered to be subjective. Therefore, this analysis could be improved with a quantitative study in which members are asked about the degree to which their functional and social needs are satisfied in online brand communities.

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